

Characteristics and Performance of High School Equivalency Exam Takers in New Jersey

Since 2014 New Jersey has offered three exams to demonstrate high school equivalency (HSE): the GED, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC). The New Jersey Department of Education wants to know the characteristics of exam takers, whether passing rates vary across HSE exams, and how a recent change in passing thresholds for the GED and the HiSET changed passing rates.

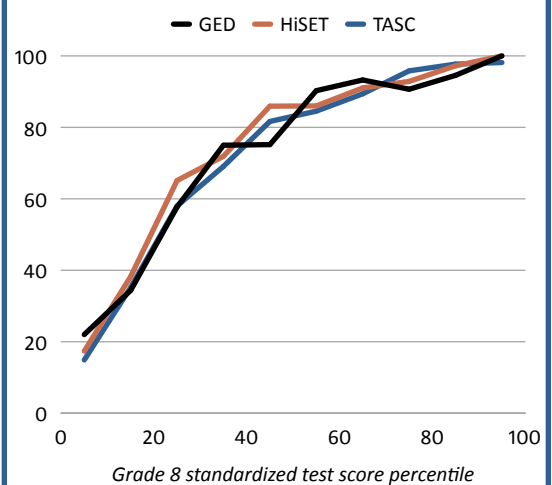
This study examined HSE exam takers who were grade 8 students in a New Jersey public school between 2008/09 and 2013/14 and attempted at least one HSE exam in New Jersey between 2014 and 2018. It used data from the New Jersey Department of Education’s statewide longitudinal education data information system and from three HSE exam vendors. The analytic methods included descriptive statistics, graphical analysis, and regression analysis.

Key findings

- **Most HSE exam takers in the study sample attempted the TASC, were eligible for the national school lunch program in grade 8, and identified as Black or Hispanic.** However, GED takers were more likely to identify as White and less likely to be eligible for the national school lunch program than HiSET and TASC takers.
- **HSE exam takers were less likely to pass the math subject tests than the other subject tests on all three exams, and only small percentages of exam takers earned scores that indicated college and career readiness.** This suggests that New Jersey could expand math preparation for HSE exam takers and that exam takers might need additional support to succeed in postsecondary education.
- **New Jersey Department of Education’s new, lower passing thresholds on the GED and the HiSET increased passing rates.** Only 47–54 percent of exam takers passed on the first attempt under the original passing thresholds compared with 54–64 percent under the new passing thresholds.
- **Among HSE exam takers with similar grade 8 standardized test scores, the likelihood of passing was similar for the GED, the HiSET, and the TASC under the New Jersey Department of Education’s new passing thresholds (see figure).** Under the old thresholds, exam takers with similar grade 8 standardized test scores were less likely to pass the GED than the HiSET or the TASC. Under the new thresholds, the passing rates on the three exams (after grade 8 standardized test scores were controlled for) were similar. This finding supports the department’s decision to adopt the new passing thresholds.

HSE takers with similar grade 8 scores were similarly likely to pass all three exams using New Jersey’s new passing scores

First-attempt passing rate (percent)



HiSET is High School Equivalency Test. HSE is high school equivalency. TASC is Test Assessing Secondary Completion.

Note: This figure includes HSE exam takers enrolled in grade 8 in a New Jersey public school between 2008/09 and 2013/14.

Source: Authors’ analysis of grade 8 standardized test scores in reading and math from NJ SMART (NJDOE’s statewide longitudinal education data system) and data on high school equivalency exam performance collected by the New Jersey Department of Education from exam vendors.